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Judson McCarley
Heather Holloway

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Judson McCarley and Heather Holloway

Most know the damaging and lethal effects that drugs and alcohol pose upon our children and young people today. Parents and schools work hard at limiting these terrible and devastating results. However, is this effort enough and what is the latest research on alcohol and drug use by school age children? Although there are significant effects from drug and alcohol use on health and academic achievement, there are a variety of interventions used in keeping children clean.

Alcohol and drug use by school-age children poses serious health and safety risks. The three leading causes of death for 15-24 year olds are automobile accidents, homicides, and suicides. The leading factor in all three of these causes is alcohol (Focus Adolescent Services). In 2001, it was reported that an astounding 3,000,000 persons aged 16-20 have driven while under the influence of alcohol at least once in the past year (The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, May, 2003).

Alcohol and drug use is increasing, especially among young teens. “The average age when youth first try alcohol is 11 years old for boys and 13 years old for girls. The average age at which Americans begin drinking regularly is 15.9 years old” (FAS, 2005, Alcohol, ¶ 2). The average age of first use of marijuana is 14 (FAS, 2005, Alcohol). There are physical, emotional, and academic warning signs of substance use (FAS, 2005, Drugs). The physical signs include: fatigue, repeated health complaints, red or glazed eyes, and a lasting cough. The emotional signs may include personality change, mood changes, irritability, irresponsible behavior, low self-esteem, and depression. Within the school environment, one may notice that a student who is using substances lacks interest, has a negative attitude, has a drop in his or her grades, is truant, and has discipline problems (FAS, 2005, Drugs).

While the average age of first time alcohol and drug use is between 11 and 14, a significant number of younger children are already using some kind of substance. Finke et al. (2002) found that 25% of fourth-grade students were using alcohol and drugs. In Muscogee County, Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) is the drug resistance program of choice. Fifth-graders in the elementary schools participate and are taught by uniformed police officers (Muscogee County School District). The research completed by Finke and colleagues (2002) suggest that having D.A.R.E. taught in the fifth-grade may be too late. Due to early and dangerous substance use among elementary school children, drug prevention programs need to begin as early as possible in the primary grades.

The number of students who use alcohol and drugs increases with age. Research conducted by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) indicated that by the time students are seniors in high school, 80% have consumed alcohol, 23% have tried marijuana, and 10% have used cocaine (Diego, Field & Sanders, 2003). The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA, July, 2003) found that the rate of drug and alcohol use were lower for youths who had seen or heard drug and alcohol prevention messages in school within the past year than for youths who had not.

Jeynes (2002) conducted a study involving 18,726 students who were participating in the National Education Longitudinal Survey. This study was concerned with the relationship between being under the influence of substances at school and academic achievement as measured by standardized test scores. While at school, 7.1% of students reported being under the influence of marijuana, 1.1% reported being under the influence of cocaine, and 13.1% reported being under the influence of alcohol. Not surprisingly, when the data were analyzed it was determined that being under the influence of marijuana, cocaine, and alcohol has a negative relationship with academic achievement (Jeynes, 2002).
A study released by the state of Washington found that even small amounts of alcohol and drug use in middle school by students’ peers had a detrimental impact on academic performance (Study Links Peer Substance Use, School Performance, 2000). Students who reported that their peers had little to no involvement with drinking or drugs did an average of 18 points higher on the state reading test and 45 points higher on the math test than did students whose peers had a low level of drinking and drug use.

In order to keep students from having a decline in their academic achievement, effective alcohol and drug prevention programs are necessary. Project D.A.R.E. is one of the most frequently used substance use prevention programs targeted at school age youth. Ennett, Tobler, and Flewelling (1994) studied the effectiveness of D.A.R.E. and found that while knowledge about drugs and alcohol was raised, the program did not prevent drug use.

There are many factors that may prevent a child from using alcohol and drugs. Hansen (as cited in Finke et al., 2002) believed it was necessary to have a program that focused on helping student’s build up their skills to resist these situational pressures. Another key factor in resisting alcohol and drugs is a healthy self esteem. Positive self-esteem is correlated with no alcohol or drug use by school age children (Finke et al., 2002). Finke et al. conducted a study to explore the effectiveness of having a substance use prevention program that teaches students survival skills to resist drugs and alcohol. Sixty-nine children from after-school programs participated in this educational program. The program incorporated videos, role-playing activities, and coping-skills exercises. When the data were analyzed, the results showed that if a child has a plan to resist use, then he or she is more likely not to use.

“Research reveals that 6th, 7th, and 8th graders are at a crucial age for either adopting or rejecting the use of substances” (Adair, 2000, p. 44). Muscogee County seems to agree with Adair. During the spring of each year, all seventh grade Muscogee County public school students attend the “Drug Free You and Me” conference. Consultants are brought in from all over the U.S. to teach students about making wise choices when it comes to alcohol and drugs (Muscogee County School District, 2005). Project ALERT is targeted at these middle level students. This program reaches students by following the social influence model. The social influence model focuses primarily on identifying and dealing with social pressures related to drug use. Project ALERT is highly interactive. It embodies many of the skills and techniques that Finke et al. (2002) found to be successful in preventing substance use. The program teaches refusal skills and advocates parental involvement. The Department of Education reported that this model is more effective than the knowledge based model, which simply presents factual information about the legal, biological and psychological effects of drugs.

When a nonprofit organization in Washington D.C. evaluated the quality of the 50 most popular drug prevention programs in the United States, Project ALERT was one of the top scorers. RAND, the developer of Project ALERT, and one of the nations leading think tanks on drug policy, field tested the program and discovered that there was a one-third reduction in the initiation of drug use (Adair, 2002).

A Project ALERT educator can be trained for $150. Project ALERT can be delivered by teachers, counselors, nurses, or many other educators (Project ALERT). Thus far 18,000 teachers nationwide have been trained to administer the program, and another 4,500 are expected to be trained by the year’s end (Adair, 2002).

In order to prevent serious health and academic achievement ramifications, effective substance prevention programs need to be employed early and consistently throughout a student’s educational career. Substance use in students can be lowered if high quality, effective programs such as Project ALERT are put into place throughout the nation. Additional research is necessary in order to help pinpoint a specific age level at which to begin extensive substance prevention programs. Research
is also needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs currently in use.

References


